7 COMMERCIAL AND

COLUMBIA/MGM/SCOTT RUDIN PROD.

A poster for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (David Fincher, 2011)

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INDUSTRIAL CONTEXTS

Our focus to this point has been on film as an art form. But for each creative decision about narrative, mise-en-scène, camera work, editing, and sound, there are also financial and practical considerations—for example, the cost of sets, equipment, effects, and other materials; the availability and cost of cast and crew; the logistics of a film's release; and how it will be marketed and exhibited to audiences. Indeed, the fundamental question of whether a movie gets made in the first place is in large part a business calculation, and the bottom line (in most cases) is that movies are designed to generate profits. For a complete critical understanding of movies, we need to recognize the financial and practical dimensions of filmmaking as well as the ways that marketing and exhibition strategies affect our expectations about a film.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to do the following:

- **7-1** Understand and appreciate how decisions made during development, production, postproduction, distribution, and exhibition are economic as well as aesthetic, and practical as well as imaginative.
- **7-2** Identify and analyze various distribution strategies and the role of trailers and posters in the marketing of motion pictures.
- **7-3** Recognize and discuss the effect of exhibition on our experience of a film.

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7-1 THE BUSINESS OF FILM

Decisions made during development, production, postproduction, distribution, and exhibition are economic as well as aesthetic, and practical as well as imaginative. Casts and crews, equipment and film, sets and costumes all cost money. Since a great deal of money is at stake with virtually every movie made—from low-budget independents (which often cost around $1 million to $3 million to produce) to studio blockbusters (which can cost $100 million or more)—the filmmaking process has over the years been set up for efficiency as well as artistry, to maximize the investment and to balance the artistic and the commercial. Filmmakers often talk about how dreams are realized on-screen. Producers and distributors are anxious to add that these dreams cost money, often a whole lot of money.

7.1 Blockbuster investments and blockbuster profits: *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) was budgeted at an estimated $250 million and grossed a jaw-dropping $2.8 billion in theatrical revenues.

7.2 *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* (David Yates, 2009), the sixth installment in the venerable franchise, cost an estimated $250 million to produce and earned close to $1 billion at the box office.

Industry insiders use terms like "bang for the buck" and "the money is up there on the screen" to describe a successful relationship between financial investment and entertainment value. This success is measured in a variety of ways. First, there are "the numbers": the number of people who pay to see the film; the number of critics, festival, and industry award judges who applaud it; and the box office numbers. And then there is the film's entertainment value, which is more difficult to measure. Was the film diverting, exciting, moving? Was it something audiences would likely remember long after they leave the theater? These latter concerns may well be the primary goals of the filmmakers, but because they are not quantifiable, the business executives who run things in Hollywood prefer the numbers; they prefer to assess value with regard to revenues and profits.

7-1a Movies and Money

Thomas Edison famously quipped in 1931 that he was surprised to see that his invention, moving pictures, had in a little over thirty years become such an important and expensive commercial medium. The inventor found the cost of producing a single film astonishing and remarkable. By 1931, several big studio productions had surpassed the $1 million mark. It is fair to wonder what he would think today as the production budget for a typical studio movie has reached $100 million and so-called event films cost over twice that amount.

The financial stakes of contemporary film production and distribution are indeed staggering. For example, in 2009 two films, *Avatar* and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, each cost an estimated $250 million to produce and another $80 million to promote and advertise (figs. **7.1** and **7.2**). *Avatar* grossed $2.8 billion

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TABLE 7.1 A Partial List of Companies in Time Warner, Inc.

Film Studios	Television Networks	Books and Magazines	Other Holdings
Warner Bros. Pictures	HBO	Warner Books	Cable delivery outfits
Warner Bros. Pictures International	Cinemax	*Time*	AOL online services and Netscape
New Line Cinema	CNN	*People*	Theme parks
Turner Original Productions	TBS & TNT	*Entertainment Weekly*	CNN Radio
DC Entertainment	The Cartoon Network	DC Comics	TMZ.com

in theatrical revenues, that is, money made screening the movie in theaters. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* brought in close to a billion dollars worldwide. As astonishing as these box office numbers are, theatrical box office for these films accounts for only part of their earning potential. Also of importance here are **ancillary revenues**, money available through TV and Internet licensing, DVD/Blu-Ray sales, and merchandising (including video games, fast food, and action figures).

For event films like *Avatar* and *Harry Potter*, the commercial investment, technical achievements, and huge audiences are as important as mise-en-scène and camera work to understanding the film's significance or value. *Avatar*, for example, is a film that is best appreciated when we consider the money and know-how that went into its production. The film is a spectacle, not just a futurist spectacle of scientific exploration undermined by the military-industrial complex (the plot of the film), but more importantly a spectacle of present-day Hollywood ingenuity, pushing past the limitations of the flat screen. There is a compelling narrative, but is it really why we're in the theater? Is it really why the film has value as entertainment, even art?

With regard to *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*, the same basic notions of value attend; spectacular investment yields spectacular images and effects. Additionally, as part of a series with a huge audience already in place from the books, the film had value for its studio, Warner Bros., as a "tent pole"—a virtually guaranteed success that makes possible the production of riskier titles. The Harry Potter franchise has alone kept the film division of Time Warner in the black for a decade and has provided the tent-pole title in 2001, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2010, and 2011. The total value of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* thus is more than the nearly $1 billion it earned at the box office and the additional revenue it earned in ancillary markets. The value of this one Harry Potter film is part of a larger commercial scenario: the nearly $8 billion the eight-film franchise has earned at the box office and the billions more in ancillary revenues.

To fully appreciate the scale, scope, and stakes of the film business in the United States, we must consider the complex structure of the corporations that now control the Hollywood studios. At the end of 2011, six corporations dominated the corporate landscape of Hollywood and by extension, American mass media:

- Time Warner (see table **7.1** above),
- Disney (including the Disney film division—Buena Vista, Pixar, and Miramax; ABC and ESPN; *Discover* and *Us Weekly* magazines; Marvel comic books; and the legendary theme parks),
- The News Corporation (20th Century Fox and Fox Searchlight; the Fox network on TV, FX, and Fox News; the *Wall Street Journal*; and AmericanIdol.com),
- Sony (Columbia Tristar, Sony Pictures, Sony Pictures Classics, and Sony Pictures Imageworks; Sony Music including Columbia, Epic, and RCA; Sony electronics retail and Sony Ericsson Mobile Communications),
- Viacom (Paramount Pictures and Paramount Vantage; MTV and Nickelodeon; Shockwave Games), and
- Comcast (Universal Pictures and Focus Features; NBC, Telemundo, and Bravo, XFINITY TV/Internet and Voice; and the Philadelphia 76ers and Philadelphia Flyers sports teams).

These multinational conglomerates operate in a **vertically integrated entertainment marketplace** that exploits

ancillary revenues Money made on a film in addition to movie theater box office—including licensing, merchandising, network and cable television, and DVD/Blu-Ray sales.

vertical integration A strategy in conglomerate capitalism in which several subsidiary companies under a single corporate umbrella perform inter-related tasks with regard to a single product. The film business today operates as a vertically integrated entertainment marketplace with the large corporations that own the film studios controlling the filmed product from development through exhibition.

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synergies, strategic relationships between the media and information companies that share corporate ownership.

Synergy has become the catchword of the new Hollywood. The studio conglomerates integrate the operations of their various holdings; they move filmed products through a variety of markets and venues all under a single corporate "umbrella." To see how synergy works, let's look at the *Batman* franchise at Time Warner. As of the end of 2012, there have been seven live-action Batman films all released by Warner Bros. Combined, the films have grossed well over $3 billion worldwide, but that is less than half of the films' overall value to the company. Batman is a DC comic character, licensed by LCA, the merchandising outfit with a stake in the profits of every Batman T-shirt, cup, comic book, and action figure. Both DC and LCA are Time Warner subsidiaries. The films have appeared on HBO and were delivered into homes across the country via cable systems owned by Time Warner. When the films were released on video and DVD, they bore the Warner Home Video label. The popular soundtrack recordings have been released by companies owned by Time Warner, featuring music by artists (like Prince) who were under contract (at the time) to Warner Music. Coverage—news and feature stories—appeared in Time Warner magazines like *Time*, *People*, and *Entertainment Weekly*. Seen from the perspective of even this single movie franchise, the value of synergy as a mode of industry and commerce is clear.

7-1b Movies, Money, and Modes of Production

The six companies mentioned above control approximately 95 percent of the film market in the United States. Operating under a significantly different economy of scale are smaller **independent film companies**, or "indies," making films on significantly tighter budgets and released to far fewer theaters. Unlike the majors, which can offset costs through the sheer volume and diversification of their corporate holdings and interests, independent films are financed individually and independently. It is a model that more simply matches a single film's gross revenues against its cost. Though the stakes are smaller, the risks are in many ways greater.

synergies Strategic relationships between media and information companies.

independent film company A company outside the conglomerate system. These companies make less-mainstream and less-expensive films.

With these more modestly budgeted films, capital investment often guides aesthetic decisions. There is a maxim in indie filmmaking: "talk is cheap, action is expensive." Indeed, indie films generally concern relationships (between human beings) and use dialogue to further the comedy or drama. This is at once a narrative convention, an aesthetic tradition, and a financial consideration.

For all films of all types, casting decisions, wardrobe choices, and even the construction of sets are all impacted by budget. The number of days for rehearsal and shooting, the amount of time for postproduction (editing suites are often rented by the hour), the quantity and quality of the special effects, and the number, timing, and placement of print and television ads are all subject to budget concerns.

To see how these budget issues have an effect upon a film's narrative, mise-en-scène, camera work, editing, and sound, let's look at the indie film *Sugar*, which entered its limited first run during the same year as *Avatar* and *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Produced on a shoestring budget for (the Time Warner subsidiary) HBO Films and picked up for limited theatrical distribution by Sony Pictures Classics, *Sugar* earned a fairly typical indie gross of just over $1 million, a fraction of what the two blockbusters earned that year.

Sugar tells the story of an aspiring young baseball player from the Dominican Republic (nicknamed Sugar after his sweet curveball), who is drafted by a professional team in the United States (fig. **7.3**). The producers of *Sugar* did not and could not cast movie stars, transport and house a large cast and crew, "fix" or enhance scenes with postproduction special effects, or use licensed pop music to set the time or location or mood of the film.

Local casting kept costs down *and* lent the film realism and authenticity; none of the actors had the box office draw of movie stars. The lead actor, Algenis Peres Soto, had never acted before; at the time the film was made, he was an aspiring young Dominican baseball player. Peres worked for far less pay than a movie star, and he performed convincingly thanks to his experience as a ballplayer. His discomfort in the staged dramatic scenes actually helped his performance as a social outcast in the film's later scenes in Iowa and Arizona.

For each location—small towns like Consuelo (in the Dominican Republic), Burlington and Davenport, Iowa, and Mesa, Arizona—the producers employed local crews and talent to cut back on transportation

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7.3 Real locations and unprofessional actors add to the authentic feel of Anna Boden and Ryan Fleck's indie feature *Sugar*. They also kept costs down.

and lodging costs. They used cheaply rented public sites and private homes and took advantage of the local denizens' interest in and excitement about their film. For example, locals helped the filmmakers dress the sets with props moved from one person's living room or kitchen to another. The net effect was an authenticity seldom achieved in bigger-budget films. This authenticity was in the end part of the film's success as a work of commercial art. But it is fair to add here that it was also the only practical strategy for the filmmakers given the budget and the mode of production they could afford.

There is an adage in the movie business: "you take the money, you lose control." Indeed, independent filmmakers are anxious to point out that they often work with far more autonomy than much better funded studio filmmakers. Because less money was at stake at both the investment and payoff ends, directors Boden and Fleck were able to tell the story they wanted to tell: a realistic story in which the young Dominican player is sent to a rural minor league outpost in Iowa where he does not overcome obstacles and does not become a success. Sugar instead suffers culture shock in small-town U.S.A. and becomes terribly homesick and runs away to join friends in New York City. His visa expires and he joins the legion of undocumented workers playing baseball not in the majors but in a rag-tag city league with other failed Dominican ballplayers. It's not the stuff of a rags-to-riches, feel-good studio movie, but then again it does not have to be; it's a low-budget movie targeted at a limited art-house audience.

This brief look at three 2009 releases illustrates that for every film there is a direct correlation between the financial investment, the film's content, and the filmgoing experience. As critical filmgoers, we need to develop an appreciation of the opportunities and constraints that the commercial context affords so that we can understand and appreciate what we see and hear in the movie theater.

7-1c Mass Production for a Mass Medium

The challenge for those who finance and make movies is to somehow transform the notoriously haphazard production of art into an industrial process that operates

Who's the Best Boy?

Here's a guide to some of the more unusual film job titles:

KILLER FILMS/THE KOBAL COLLECTION

Boone Narr, animal wrangler.

Animal wranglers train and take care of animals used on the set.

Best boys (men or women) assist the gaffer and the key grip.

Boom operators control the long pole from which a microphone is suspended for the capture of live dialogue.

Cablemen (or women) make sure the boom operator's path is clear of the many electrical cables on the set floor.

Gaffers serve as the production's chief electrician.

Grips are lighting and rigging technicians. The **key grip** supervises the grip crew.

Greensmen (or women) select and maintain the sets' plants.

Property masters acquire or build and keep track of the various props.

Video assist operators record scenes on videotape while the camera operators record scenes on film.

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7.4 The Ford Motor Company's assembly line, circa 1935. Fordism—the style and mode of production developed by Henry Ford for the automobile industry—became the model for film production.

PIONEER PICTURES/THE KOBAL COLLECTION

7.5 On the set of Rouben Mamoulian's *Becky Sharp* (1935). Note how many people are doing different jobs in order to produce this single shot: sound recordist Earl A. Wolcott (bottom right), director Rouben Mamoulian (in the suit with the white pocket square in the center of the picture), camera operator (most likely W. Howard Greene), the actors performing the scene (far left), and assorted crew members waiting for the shot to be completed so they can strike this setup and prepare for the next shot.

within a predictable schedule and budget. From the very early years of film production in the United States through today, this challenge has been met with industry cooperation and collusion, monopolization, conglomeration, and globalization. The first industry cartel was formed in 1908 as the ten biggest film companies joined forces to create the Motion Pictures Patents Company, or MPPC trust, with the main goal of standardizing and streamlining production and distribution policies and procedures in order to maximize profits.

When the MPPC fell apart and the nascent Hollywood studios took shape in the 1920s, they too sought to protect their investments by adopting a stable production system and strategic relationships to standardize and streamline their operations. The key to their new process was the assembly-line mode of production popularized by auto entrepreneur Henry Ford (fig. **7.4**), a collaborative system in which crew members skilled at a single task (lighting, camera operation, set building, etc.) worked simultaneously or sequentially to complete the final product (fig. **7.5**). The studios' version of **Fordism** was essentially a "contract system" that secured movie industry workers to fixed-term exclusive contracts: carpenters, painters, and electricians as well as writers, actors, and directors could be tied to a single studio for as many as seven years. Film workers got steady employment, and the studios got ready access to an expert workforce.

The assembly-line model allowed studios in the classical era to time their many productions so that their contracted workforce might be moved from one film project to the next; once a carpenter finished building the sets for one of the studio's films, he or she moved on to the next production in the queue. The same basic system structured and timed the contributions of everyone under contract to the studio. This system not only optimized the workforce, it also created discernible studio styles because the same studio set designers, hairdressers, costume designers, cinematographers, writers, directors, and actors worked on several studio films every year. This created a continuity based on their expert work that we can observe from film to film.

After World War II, the contract system was slowly dismantled. Nearly everyone who works on a film today is an independent contractor hired on a film-by-film basis. But while the process of securing the services of an expert workforce has changed, the similarity to assembly-line production remains apt. Films are still shot in the most time- and cost-effective sequence that the producers can develop, so that **principal photography** is organized

Fordism A production system modeled on the assembly-line operation popularized by Henry Ford.

principal photography The phase of film production in which the scenes are shot.

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Movie Making: From Story to Print

What follows is meant to follow "the life of a film" from idea through the completion of a final cut. This introduces the basic steps in the process and may well not apply to every film. The chart below is meant only to introduce the basic steps in the movie-making process.

DEVELOPMENT AND PREPRODUCTION

- The **producer** initiates the project and works with the **screenwriter** to develop the story. The producer lines up financing.
- A director and stars may become "attached" to the project.
- Business units are set up to manage the planning, scheduling, contracts, accounting, payroll, and other operations.
- **Executive producers** make sure that budgeted tasks and salaries are paid.
- **Line producers** supervise day-to-day production.
- **Casting agents** work with the producer and director to line up actors, who begin preparing for their roles.
- Other creative units, under the **director**, begin planning the production design, photography, and sound design for the movie. The **production manager**, who operates as a liaison between the producers and director, arranges for the crew and equipment needed on the set.

PRODUCTION

- Cast and crew report to work on the set at the times specified on each day's call sheet. The grip, electric, and production design crews ready the set for the camera and sound departments; the actors are sent to hair, makeup, and wardrobe.
- The **assistant director** (AD) prepares everyone on the set for the filming of a scene, while the director calls "action" and "cut." Most scenes involve several setups (camera angles) and takes.
- The actors, director, sound and camera operators review the scene via video-assist or dailies.

POSTPRODUCTION

- In collaboration with the director, the **editor** supervises the cutting and assembling of the film.
- The **sound designer** (often the supervising sound editor) creates (edits and mixes) the soundtrack, working with units who rerecord the actors, produce sound effects, and compose or acquire music.
- **Visual effects artists** add effects and imagery that are not possible to create on a set.
- **Lab technicians** work to create a number of prints of the film, culminating in the final version. Color corrections are made at this stage.

DREAMWORKS LLC/THE KOBAL COLLECTION/IOVINO, PETER

Director Todd Haynes and composer Elmer Bernstein at work on the *Far from Heaven* score (2002).

Revolution Studios, Jerry Bruckheimer Films, Scott Free Productions. 2001

Assistant Director (AD) Terry Needham on the location set of Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001).

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7.6–7.9 Four scenes set aboard the doomed jetliner in *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006). Though these scenes occur at different times in the film (the 11, 59, 72, and 97 minute marks, respectively) and are interrupted by numerous scenes set elsewhere, they were undoubtedly all filmed during the same time period, before the crew moved on to another set.

not by the sequence of scenes laid out in the script but instead in concert with the use of certain sets and actors.

For example, let's consider how the organization of shots differed in the script and in the shooting schedule for *United 93*. The film tells the story of the September 11 airplane hijacking by cutting back and forth between two parallel (and simultaneous) narratives. The first tracks the hijackers, the passengers, and the crew of United 93; the second takes us inside several air-traffic-control centers as well as FAA headquarters and the U.S. Air Force Command Center and shows the workers in each of these places as they discover the awful truth about the hijacked plane. For practical reasons, the shooting schedule did not follow the sequence of events laid out in the script. For example, the crew filmed all of the scenes that happened on board the jet (figs. **7.6–7.9**) before moving on to a new location or set. Only when their work was complete on the airplane set did the crew (and different members of the cast) shoot scenes that used other sets: the air traffic control centers, for example. In the story we see unfold on-screen, we switch back and forth from one location to another. But this narrative sequence is a product of editing, carefully designed to hide the means of production, as we saw in Chapter 5.

7-2 DISTRIBUTION AND MARKETING

As of the end of 2011, approximately 90 percent of the film distribution in the United States was controlled by Disney, Fox, Paramount, Sony (which owns Columbia), Universal, and Warner Bros. film studios. These Hollywood studios controlled the planning and execution of promotion and merchandising (the production of trailers, the design of posters, and the coordination of test screenings) as well as the duplication and trafficking of **prints** to theaters for exhibition.

print The developed film (or positive print) sent by the distributor to the exhibitor and meant to be screened on a motion picture projector.

In exchange for the money invested during this phase of a film's journey from development to exhibition, the studios secure the copyright to every film they distribute. Indeed, the very first thing you see when a film is unspooled is the corporate logo of the distributor: the MGM lion, Columbia's woman with a torch, Warner Bros.' WB, and so on. In American moviemaking there is a difference between authorship and

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ABC-TV/THE KOBAL COLLECTION/SJODIN, CRAIG

7.10 The director Quentin Tarantino on Jimmy Kimmel Live promoting *Kill Bill: Volume 1* in 2003. The director's appearance got the word out to the hip audience for Kimmel's show that a film targeted at them had just been released.

ownership, between the creative talent that "makes" the movie and the financial talent that takes the film from development through exhibition. That corporate logo then is a significant gesture, one that serves as a reminder from the moment the picture unspools that the film belongs to the studio and the film's credited director works for them.

7-2a Positioning

Movies, like plays and concerts, are a unique consumable; the customer need only "bite" once. To pique our interest, distributors provide just enough of a taste of the final product to convince us to see their films. Promotion and advertising is so important that in the contemporary U.S. industry, marketing routinely adds an additional 33 to 50 percent to a film's overall budget.

Movie executives talk about **positioning** films in the marketplace because that is exactly what they set out to do: to generate and manage the discourse, or "buzz," surrounding a film in companion media, including print, TV, and the Internet. This involves trailers, posters, feature stories strategically placed in the popular press, postings on the web, and appearances by movie stars and filmmakers on TV talk shows all staying, in the parlance of the industry, "on message" (fig. **7.10**).

Positioning a film is not unlike orchestrating a political candidate's public relations campaign. First, you play to your base; you make sure that those likely to be interested in the film because of its genre, its stars, or its politics know about the film's scheduled opening and are reminded and enticed to go see the film. And then you reach out to those folks in other demographics—other age brackets, geographical regions, membership in oppositional political parties that might be interested if only they knew more, or at least knew what the studio marketers want them to know about the film.

Let's take a quick look at the positioning strategy employed by Sony Pictures in advance of the release of David Fincher's 2011 remake of the 2009 Swedish film *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (Niels Arden Oplev), itself based on a popular novel of the same title written by Stieg Larsson. The Sony marketing team appreciated that their first task was to excite and reassure fans of the original, the project's core audience. To do so, six months before the Hollywood remake was scheduled to premiere, the marketers released a trailer to theaters at the height of the summer season. The trailer featured a fast-paced montage of images recalling the first film. Set to a sped-up version of Led Zeppelin's "The Immigrant Song," reworked by popular recording artists Trent Reznor and Karen O (to give the trailer an aura of modern cool), we see images of a frozen landscape, the "girl" on her motorcycle, the tattoo in question on the "girl's" naked back, the popular movie star Daniel Craig in the lead male role, and the actress Rooney Mara transformed to match the punk look of Noomi Rapace as Lisbeth Salander, the "girl" in the original film (figs. **7.11** and **7.12**).

Months later, a NSFW (Not Suitable for Workplace) poster and trailer was leaked on the web that seemed to be designed to reassure fans of the original that the Hollywood version would not be "soft." The audacious positioning campaign was summed up in the all-audiences trailer with the tagline: "The feel bad movie of Christmas." Well before the film's release date, Sony was positioning the film with regard to the other Christmas season films.

positioning A marketing term that refers to the work of generating and managing the discourse surrounding a film.

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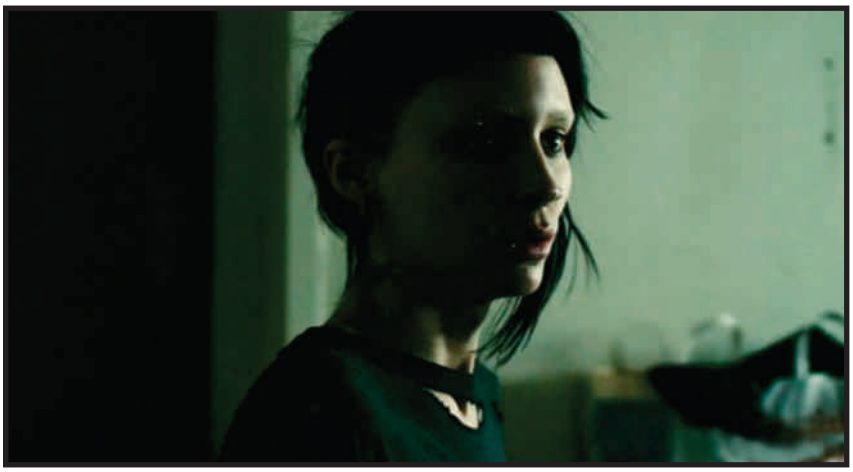
7.11 Rooney Mara as Erica Albright, the young woman who breaks Mark Zuckerberg's heart in *The Social Network* (David Fincher, 2010).



7.12 Rooney Mara one year later as Lisbeth Salander in the trailer for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (David Fincher, 2011). Sony used the trailer to assure filmgoers that the Hollywood blockbuster would not veer far from the original 2009 version of the film, directed by Niels Arden Oplev.

7-2b Trailers and Posters

One of the principal challenges of positioning a film in advance of its release is settling upon a message that can be capsulized in what's called a **tagline**, for example: "Ice cold. Hot wired." for the car thief movie *Gone in Sixty Seconds* (Dominick Sena, 2000) or "He was dead. But he got better." for the unlikely sequel *Crank: High Voltage* (Mark Neveldine and Brian Taylor, 2009). Also important are visual promotions—trailers and posters that in a 90-second series of clips from the movie or a single captivating print image give potential filmgoers a taste of what's to come . . . a taste good enough or interesting enough to get them to buy tickets to see the film.

tagline A line used in marketing that communicates the message of the film for audiences.

Two types of trailers are used for commercial films. The "teaser" trailer, like the trailer for *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* discussed above, is released six months before a film is scheduled to reach theaters. It enables distributors to advertise summer blockbusters during the Christmas season and Christmas movies in the summer. Teaser trailers are designed to reveal little about a movie's actual content; instead the focus is on the stars and the genre. The theatrical, or "story," trailer follows several months later to further position the product in the marketplace. Story trailers are at once a free sample designed to get potential filmgoers to pay for the real thing and works of art unto themselves. They are 90-second films that showcase expertly compiled and edited footage from the feature to express the studio's message about the movie.

Posters are another key aspect of the marketing campaign. A successful poster, like a successful trailer, answers the two key questions: Who is in the picture? What is the picture about? Successful poster design keeps the larger promotional scheme on message, and in doing so positions the film. Posters are used to announce a film's arrival in the marketplace; they are strategically placed in theater lobbies, in newspapers and magazines, and on the Internet. Combining text and image in a single dramatic visual, the poster suggests the kind of experience the movie will offer audiences.

Posters can be revealing about what marketers want to highlight and what potential problems a new film release might face. For example, the poster for the 2008 film adaptation of the popular television show *Sex and the City* makes sure that the target audience knows that the film will feature the same characters and

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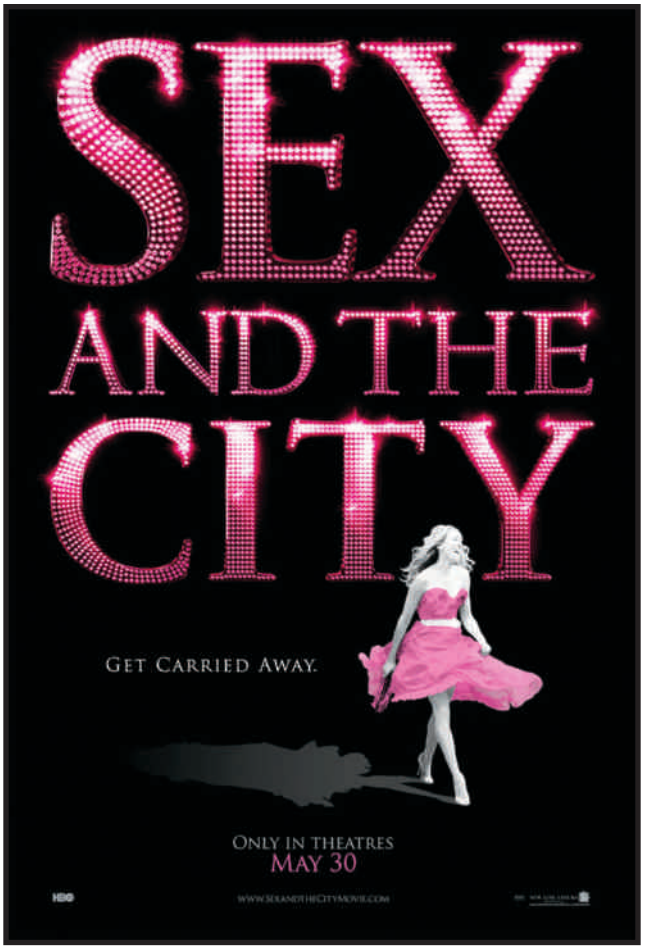

NEW LINE CINEMA/THE KOBAL COLLECTION

7.13 The simple but effective poster hawking the film adaptation of the popular television show *Sex and the City* (Michael Patrick King, 2008).

actors (fig. **7.13**). This is revealed in the play on words in the tagline: "Get Carried Away," which subtly refers to the character "Carrie" played by the actress Sarah Jessica Parker, whom we see in full figure just below the title. The choice of pink letters (using the typeface of the original HBO series) carries the "chick flick" message and the black background hints at the swinging nighttime lifestyle enjoyed by the young women on the show. The billowy pink dress (reminiscent of the dress Carrie wears in the opening sequence of the TV show) speaks to the show's fashion consciousness, another aspect of the film that the New Line marketers (who work for Time Warner, which also owns HBO) want to highlight. Finally, there is the parenthetical phrase just above the May 30 release date: "(Only in Theaters)," which brings us to the primary challenge for the marketers. With reruns of the show on HBO and basic cable, marketers used the phrase to remind fans the only way to see a *new* episode is to see the feature on the big screen.

7-2c Test Screenings

Before a film is released and the promotional campaign fully realized, distributors routinely conduct **test screenings** to see how audiences react to the film. In order to generate a diverse sample and to approximate future box office performance as closely as possible, test screenings are staged in a variety of geographic sites (urban, suburban, and rural; north, south, east, and west; red state and blue state) and with filmgoers codified by gender, education, income, and religious affiliation.

Test audiences are asked to fill out comment cards after the screening. Responses at test screenings can have a significant impact on the final cut of a film. For example, test audiences rejected the original ending of Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987), in which the scheming adulteress Alex Forest commits suicide and in doing so implicates Dan, her married lover, whose prints the police find all over the knife she uses to kill herself. Test audiences hated that the Alex Forest character seemed to win in the end and the comment cards overwhelmingly disapproved of the ending. So the director Adrian Lyne, at the behest of Paramount Pictures executives, rewrote and reshot the ending, having Dan's wife Beth gun down Alex to save her man and her marriage.

Sometimes positive remarks on the audience cards lead to significant changes as well. When test audiences responded positively to the actor Rupert Everett in *My Best Friend's Wedding*, Columbia/Tri-Star executives ordered new scenes showcasing the actor (fig. **7.14**).

Though reshoots and re-editing make for dramatic industry copy, any significant delay in a film's release is expensive and risky. More often test screenings are used to predict a film's potential at the box office, a projection that often impacts the budget provided for promotion and advertising. Test screenings are also used to shape the marketing message and positioning of the film in parallel media.

Another market concern that may affect a film's release regards the **Voluntary Movie Rating System**, the G, PG, PG-13, R, or NC-17 imposed by the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA) for the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).

test screening A prerelease film screening to gather reactions from sample audiences.

Voluntary Movie Rating System The system of assigning a rating that is meant to provide information about the appropriateness of a film for audiences 17 and under. Managed by CARA (the Classification and Rating Administration) for the MPAA (the Motion Picture Association of America).

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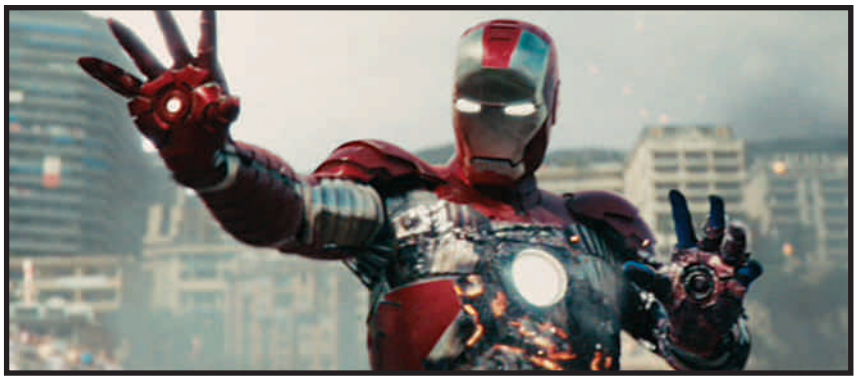
7.14 The consensus among the comment cards at test screenings was that Rupert Everett's performance was the best thing about *My Best Friend's Wedding* (P. J. Hogan, 1997), so Columbia/Tri-Star executives called for a few new scenes featuring (more of) his character.



7.15 *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010) grossed over $200 million in its opening week then dropped off to just $40 million during its second week. Despite the dropoff, the film was considered a huge success.

Contracts with filmmakers routinely include "guarantees" of delivery of a final print that falls within a certain classification. So, for example, if CARA gives a film an R and the filmmakers have agreed to deliver a PG-13 print, they must negotiate with CARA and make appropriate changes to get the designation changed.

This comes up as well when directors agree to deliver an R-rated film and get stuck with an NC-17. In the summer of 1999, for example, two very different films that had contractual provisions for delivery of an R-rated version initially received an NC-17: *Eyes Wide Shut* (Stanley Kubrick) and *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* (Trey Parker). To get an R, Kubrick supervised the addition of computer-generated human figures to obstruct our view of the action during a long orgy scene. And to get their R, the animators producing the *South Park* film submitted six versions of their film, each with modification in the outrageous language and content of their satire, before finally getting an R. Hollywood movies are products of collaboration and compromise; what we see on-screen is often a balance of creative inspiration and commercial practicalities.

7-2d Distribution Strategies

The decisions regarding the promotion, advertising, and positioning of a film in the marketplace culminate in the actual distribution of film prints to theaters. Distributors opt to open big or small (to a lot of theaters or to just a few) depending on the scale of the production and their investment, the budget secured for advertising and promotion, the targeted audience (e.g., everyone, just teenagers, just the art house crowd), and marketing assumptions based on test screenings regarding a film's **marketability** (its potential as a commercial property independent of its quality) and "**playability**" (its creative quality independent of its commercial potential). Where and when a film will open and how many prints will be made available are calculations aimed to maximize the return on investment. For filmgoers, the distribution strategy to a large extent determines what films we will have access to in the local multiplex or art theater, when we will have access to them, and for how long.

In order to open big consistently, the contemporary studios have opted to focus almost all of their energy on "presold properties": adaptations of best-sellers and comic books, sequels, and remakes that have such universal name recognition that they effectively sell themselves. For example, Paramount Pictures opened its presold property *Iron Man 2* "big" to 4,380 screens on the weekend of May 7–9, 2010 (fig. **7.15**). This smart, albeit predictable **saturation distribution strategy**—so named because the

marketability A film's potential as a commercial property independent of its quality.

playability A film's creative quality independent of its commercial potential.

saturation distribution strategy A strategy that aims for a big payoff on a film's opening weekend.

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7.16 *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming) in its exclusive engagement at the Astor Theater on Broadway in Times Square, winter 1939.

market appears saturated by prints of a given film—succeeded: *Iron Man 2* earned over $128 million on its first weekend in release.

The saturation release strategy is simple: put a film into as many theaters and onto as many screens as possible from the very start of its nationwide run. Most big contemporary Hollywood films today get a saturation release. In the summer of 2010, four other studio blockbusters similarly saturated the marketplace during their first week in release: *The Twilight Saga: Eclipse* (David Slade) and *Toy Story 3* (Lee Unkrich) opened on over 4,000 screens and *The A-Team* (Joe Carnahan) and *Sex and the City 2* (Michael Patrick King) both opened on over 3,500. With the saturation release, the opening weekend gains a singular importance. In the twenty-first-century U.S. market, the first weekend can account for as much as 40 percent of a big film's overall take at the box office.

The saturation release corresponds to a growing demand among contemporary consumers for instant access. Marketing campaigns for big films highlight such accessibility. In 1996, for example, the poster heralding the release of the summer blockbuster *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996) noted simply that the film was set to open on July 3rd "everywhere."

The saturation release strategy was not used much for blockbusters produced between 1915 and 1980. These big studio films were generally released following a **showcase distribution strategy** (aka "road show" or "reserve seat engagement"), in which distributors made available a limited number of prints for which only the biggest urban movie houses might negotiate a licensing deal. The slow buildup from the limited showcase engagements to a full nationwide release created demand by limiting supply.

The classical Hollywood blockbuster *Gone with the Wind* was released following a roadshow strategy (fig. **7.16**). The film premiered on December 15, 1939, at just one theater in Atlanta, then, later that week opened at just one more in New York City. In subsequent weeks the film was released to a handful of other big cities in exclusive, reserve-ticket engagements. *Gone with the Wind* did not reach smaller venues until early in 1941, over a year after its premiere. The roadshow release built upon the essential glamour of Hollywood and the strict limits on the number of screening venues fueled filmgoer demand.

Releasing big films is expensive, but the return on the investment is fast and predictable. More care must be taken with "smaller" films, "independent" or niche films, and movies produced outside the studio system. For these films, distributors often open with a "limited release," a playoff at select venues, hoping to build to a wider release from positive word of mouth, the buzz created by the few filmgoers and critics who see the film during its opening weeks in release.

For a low-budget film like Nicole Holofcener's *Please Give* (fig. **7.17**), released just 90 days before *Iron Man 2*, the opening weekend called for only five prints. Once the film gained some traction in the art-film market, Sony Pictures Classics (a boutique division of the multinational studio Sony Pictures) ordered 21 more. The height of its release was a full seven weeks into its first run as the studio had in release 272 prints. But even at its peak, *Please Give* reached just over 6 percent of the screens accessed by *Iron Man 2*.

Alternative films require alternative distribution strategies. One such strategy used in the 1930s through

showcase distribution strategy A strategy that involves the slow build-up from limited showings to a full nationwide release.

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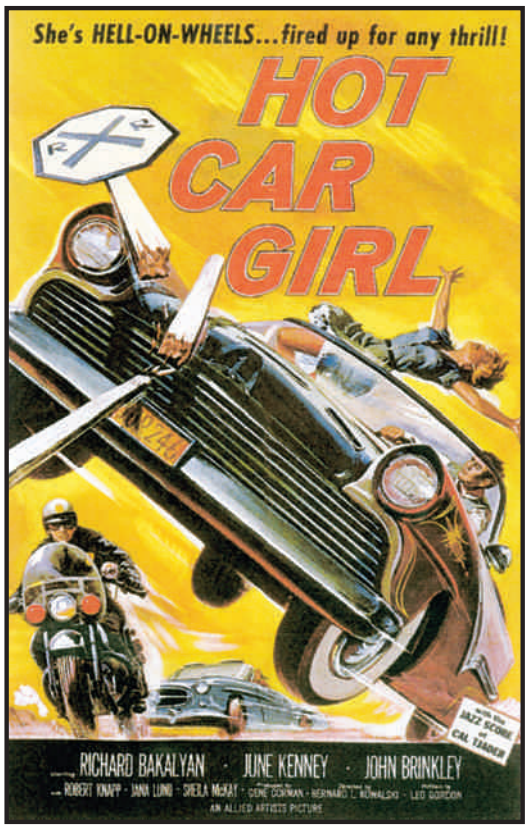
7.17 For the opening weekend of the low-budget *Please Give* (Nicole Holofcener, 2010), Sony ordered just five prints. When the film gained a little traction, the studio upped its order slowly and cautiously, peaking at 272 screens in its seventh week in release.


She's HELL-ON-WHEELS...fired up for any thrill!
HOT CAR GIRL
RICHARD BAKALYAN · JUNE KENNEY · JOHN BRINKLEY
AN ALLIED ARTISTS PICTURE

ALLIED ARTISTS/THE KOBAL COLLECTION

7.18 A poster promoting the 1958 exploitation feature *Hot Car Girl* (Bernard L. Kowalski). Four-walling a film like this allowed Allied Artists, the film distributor, to screen the film and then get out of town before local censors could shut the screening down or, worse, seize the print.

four-walling A strategy of renting a theater for a day or so before moving the print to a new town.

Motion Picture Production Code The strict set of censorship guidelines adopted by the Hollywood studios in the 1930s and enforced through the 1960s.

the 1960s was **four-walling**. Often used by distributors of exploitation films—low-budget, mostly genre pictures that featured exploitive content (otherwise banned in mainstream films)—as well as indie distributors of G-rated family-oriented pictures (like Mulberry Square Releasing's playoff of its 1974 picture, *Benji*, directed by Joe Camp), this method involved renting a theater (all four walls, hence the term) for a limited engagement, often as brief as a single day. This method of distribution and exhibition benefited both parties: the exhibitor got a flat rental fee for the theater up front at no risk, and the distributor did not have to share ticket revenues with the exhibitor should a big crowd arrive. Since many exploitation films defied some basic premise of the **Motion Picture Production Code**, the strict set of censorship guidelines adopted by the Hollywood studios in the 1930s through the late 1960s, four-walling enabled the distributor to get out of town before local censors could shut down the screening or, worse, seize the print.

Different modes of distribution present films differently to the public. For example, seeing *Hot Car Girl* in a four-walled playoff in 1958 gave the audience the sense that they were witnessing something clandestine and taboo (fig. **7.18**). People who saw *Iron Man 2* in a multiplex during its opening weekend in May 2010 or *Gone with the Wind* in its showcase run at the Astor Theater in New York City in the winter of 1939 likely felt excitement at being among the first to experience an event of pop-culture significance. And those who "discovered" *Please Give* in its limited opening weekend or in its brief wider run felt like they had the inside scoop on a neat alternative to the mainstream releases that otherwise dominate the marketplace. The key here is how the distribution strategy influences our expectations, experience, and critical understanding of a given film.

7-2e Cross-Promotion and Merchandising

For their bigger titles, studios now exploit the synergistic relationships not only among the various audiovisual media (network and cable TV, DVD, video-on-demand, streamed movies on the Internet, etc.) but among consumer and fast-food industries as well. This

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cross-promotion involves the use of alternative media (television, the Internet, newspapers, and magazines) and cooperative deals with toy and fast-food companies to mount a saturation marketing campaign. This style of marketing is used to kick-start the inevitable saturation distribution strategy.

Cross-promotion is designed to suit the movement of a film through multiple access points: theater, TV, computer, tablet, smart phone, and so on. The 2010 summer hit *Iron Man 2*, for example, exploited TV and magazine spots for Burger King and Audi automobiles (which also included prominent "product placement" in the film: the hero Tony Stark drives a white Audi R-8 with numbered vanity plates, making sure we know he has several such German supercars). Through Marvel Entertainment (which owns the Iron Man brand), Paramount licensed an array of action figures, lunch boxes, and toys, including Burger King Happy Meal collectibles and an Iron Man Mr. Potato Head. The goal is ubiquity: everywhere you look (or eat), there is a reminder of the film.

7-3 EXHIBITION

Distributors get their films into theaters through booking agents or by working directly with theater owners or managers. Exhibitors provide the venue (the movie theater) and they preside over each movie screening. Though we may not think that much about the mechanics or the business of exhibition (except when things go wrong in the theater), the way a film is screened—how the images are projected and how the sounds are played back and amplified—is very important to the overall filmgoing experience.

Exhibitors rent or license a single positive print of a film for the purposes of screening it (and charging admission) to an audience. In exchange for permission to screen the movie in their theaters, exhibitors pay a licensing fee to the distributor. A typical distribution/exhibition agreement involves a shared percentage of a film's box office revenue (as much as 90 percent to the distributor in some cases, especially during a film's initial week in release) calculated against a minimum flat fee called the guarantee. After the film's run is complete and revenues are calculated, theater owners must pay the film distributor either the negotiated percentage or the guarantee, whichever is higher.

Exhibition today has expanded beyond the movie theater to include an array of modes of multimedia reception. Movies are accessed legally through cable and satellite TV and pay sites like iTunes, Amazon, and Netflix and surreptitiously on the web through torrent sites (which allow for the mostly clandestine and unlicensed sharing of uploaded movies on the Internet). While it is worth thinking about how each of these many new venues for home entertainment has changed the "filmgoing" experience, we will focus here primarily on theatrical exhibition, the first and most important access point in contemporary distribution and exhibition.

7-3a From Storefront Theaters to the Modern Multiplex

The commercial exhibition of motion pictures dates to April 1894 with the opening of the Holland Brothers Kinetoscope Parlor on Broadway in New York City. For this first commercial exhibition, patrons watched films by peering into a Kinetoscope, a hand-cranked moving picture viewer (fig. **7.19**).

Within two years, projected movies had been screened in France, England, and the United States. The dynamics of these two modes of exhibition (hand-cranked and projected) were different, but both highlighted the medium's essential conceit that movies are made for public exhibition.

In the late nineteenth century and through the early 1900s, films were shown at a variety of public venues: at vaudeville (traveling variety) shows, in saloons, at penny arcades in amusement parks, and during intermission at theater productions. But as the medium caught on, storefront theaters called **nickelodeons**, so named because it cost a nickel to view a program of short motion pictures, became popular (fig. **7.20**).

Not all movie theaters and, as a consequence, not all moviegoing experiences are created equal. Early cinema began as a novelty, a curio of the machine age. Nickelodeon parlors and storefront theaters enabled viewers to intimately peruse the new invention. But as movies

cross-promotion The use of partnerships with toy, fast-food, and media companies to build the visibility of an event film.

nickelodeon A storefront theater that showed films during the early cinema era. A series or group of short films were available for viewing for a nickel.

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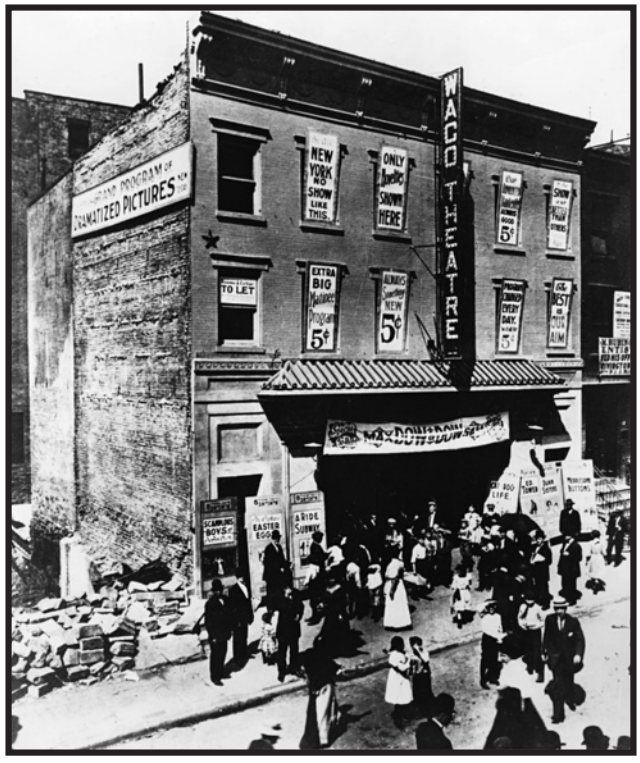
7.19 Inside a Kinetoscope parlor, 1895.



THE KOBAL COLLECTION

7.20 A nickelodeon theater in Waco, Texas.

movie palace An opulent standalone theater that brought glamor to the moviegoing experience. In the 1910s movie palaces had seating capacities approaching 1,000. By the 1940s, some movie palaces could seat over 5,000.

multiplex A single venue with multiple screens. A venue with 16 screens or more is known as a **megaplex**.

art house A theater, also known as an independent movie theater, that typically screens independent and foreign-language films.

caught on and moviemaking became more ambitious and sophisticated, movie theaters quickly became an important public space, especially in working-class American culture. Even when ticket prices were doubled (from a nickel to a dime around 1910), moviegoing remained a fairly cheap form of entertainment, very much tied to working-class culture.

In the 1910s opulent theaters with capacities approaching 1,000 patrons opened for business. These **movie palaces** cemented the medium's communal dynamic, bringing people from all walks of life together in the dark for a couple of hours. By the 1930s, the movie palace was a hallmark of classical Hollywood, providing for the working-class filmgoer a step into a glamorous world to which he or she would otherwise never gain entrée (fig. **7.21**).

The movie palace was the model for United States and worldwide film exhibition until the 1960s when the **multiplex**—a single venue with multiple screens—became popular. The multiplex enabled theater owners to increase revenue with little additional overhead. Exhibitors did not have to "come off" (end the run of) a successful film before licensing another picture, and they could with the same basic staff access revenue from more than one film at a time.

The multiplex and its gargantuan sibling the **megaplex** (a term exhibitors use for venues with sixteen or more screens) have changed the dynamics and to an extent diminished the quality of the filmgoing experience. That many multiplexes are situated in shopping malls—suburban sites that offer one-stop shopping—renders analogous the consumption of fast food (at food courts), cheap consumer products (clothing, etc.), and movies.

Most multiplexes are owned by theater chains like Regal, AMC, Cinemark, and Carmike. With this conglomerate ownership has come standardization; one multiplex theater is more or less like any other. The screens have gotten smaller and so have the individual theaters as so-called stadium seating has enabled exhibitors to literally stack filmgoers one on top of the other. Theater owners once fashioned themselves "showmen" and valued "presentation"—how the movie show is presented to filmgoers. As smaller screens have become the norm, and sound leakage from theater to theater an everyday occurrence, quality presentation has become less important to theater owners than the volume of business they can bring in (fig. **7.22**).

The **art house** or independent movie theater offers an alternative to mainstream movie presentation, routinely booking films that the multiplexes don't. Art houses tend to be more intimate (like the films shown there) and

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7.21 The movie palace as a signifier of Hollywood glamour. Grauman's Chinese Theater on Hollywood Boulevard, circa 1946.

© arabianEye/Corbis

7.22 So many choices . . . exhibition in the era of the multiplex is all about volume: more movies, more screenings, more seats, more money.

can be quirky little establishments with a funky charm, unusual concessions, and owner-operators who get to know their customers. These venues persist despite tough economic times for the consumer, for the independent filmmaker and independent film distributor, and for art theater owners nationwide. Art houses can be found in college towns (like the Darkside Cinema in fig. **7.23**) and urban centers and often become mainstays in the larger alternative, progressive political subcultures where they are situated.

Where we see a film and how that film is presented influences our reception, appreciation, and critical understanding. The sites themselves offer a critical context; where the film is shown to an extent defines what sort of commercial product it is: a multiplex blockbuster or an art-house film, for example. Seeing a movie in a

Courtesy of the Darkside Cinema

7.23 The funky charm of the Darkside Cinema, an art house in Corvallis, Oregon.

crowded multiplex theater makes moviegoing an event, and the shared energy in the theater certainly affects our reception of the film. Laughing comes easier when others are laughing. Tension seems all the more tense when others share in the anxiety. The more sober, intimate atmosphere of the art house situates in a different way the film and the filmgoer. As critical filmgoers, it is worth thinking about how site-specific our reactions to and readings of films are.

7-3b Theatrical Formats: Flat and Widescreen

The overall look of a film depends on its **aspect ratio**, the ratio of frame width to frame height. The standard frame proportions of Hollywood film through much of the silent and early sound era were 1.33:1 and then 1.37:1 (approximately 4:3). In the 1930s the Hollywood-based Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) gave this screen shape its name: the **Academy ratio** (fig.**7.24**).

When television, which initially shared the Academy ratio's basic shape, emerged as a competitive medium, moviemakers and exhibitors began experimenting with aspect ratio as a way to add value to the filmgoing experience. A variety of **widescreen** ratios were introduced, including 1.66:1 and later 1.85:1. In

aspect ratio The ratio of frame width to frame height. The **Academy ratio** was the standard during much of the silent and early sound era. **Widescreen** formats include Cinemascope and Panavision.

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7.24 *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941) shot and presented in the Academy ratio (1.37:1).

1953, Cinemascope (2.35:1) was introduced, and then in the 1960s filmmakers and exhibitors began experimenting with 70mm (2.21:1).

The current format of choice is Panavision, the letterbox-shaped frame of many contemporary movies, which established a standard widescreen ratio of 2.40:1 (fig. **7.25**). Some DVDs and TVs give the viewer the choice of watching a "letterbox" image that matches the proper aspect ratio of the film but fills only a portion of the home screen or reformatting that image to fill the TV screen (figs. **7.25** and **7.26**). While reformatting may provide a bigger image, it betrays the fundamental look of the film and can affect meaning.

7.25 Contemporary Panavision (2.40:1) in Andrew Niccol's sci-fi parable *Gattaca* (1997).

7.26 Same image, same film, different impact—*Gattaca* reformatted for "full-screen" TV. Note how the formatting affects the framing of the film's hero Vincent (he now appears closer to the front of the frame) and crops out some of the other figures in the scene.

While films are produced with an aesthetic based on a certain-shaped frame, the print itself may be delivered in the Academy ratio and exhibitors are then called upon to "mask" the film to create a widescreen aspect ratio. Masking is executed by attaching an aperture plate or hard matte to the projector (or if masking is done during production, to the camera). Failure to properly mask the image during exhibition might leave production equipment visible in the frame, an embarrassment for everyone concerned.

Another way to exhibit widescreen is through the use of an anamorphic print and lens. This lens squeezes the image horizontally either during production or at the lab when the film is developed. Cinemascope, which involves the use of an anamorphic lens, introduced an aspect ratio of 2.35:1. This was later adjusted to match the aspect ratio of Panavision, which also uses an anamorphic lens to achieve a ratio of 2.40:1, the standard widescreen shape today.

It is vital for the exhibitor to get the shape of the image correct and to use the appropriate lens on the projector. Proper presentation allows the film to be screened as its makers intended and offers the filmgoer a full appreciation of the film's overall design, mise-en-scène, and camera work.

7-3c The Future of Film Exhibition: IMAX, 3-D, and Digital Cinema

While multiplexes function on an economy of scale—more screens, more films, more patrons, more popcorn

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and pop—selected theaters have adopted new immersive widescreen formats in order to offer a dramatic alternative to the conventional filmgoing experience. IMAX, the best known and most widely implemented of these new formats, was introduced at the 1986 Expo in Vancouver, British Columbia, and then found a home at science and industry museums worldwide (fig. **7.27**).

Feature film presentation in IMAX began in 2002 with *Apollo 13* (Ron Howard). Since then, selected studio titles (action blockbusters and animated films mostly) have been adapted for the huge screen with IMAX's DRM (Digital Re-Mastering) technology. IMAX offers a spectacular widescreen experience, projecting remarkably clear images from film stock approximately ten times larger than standard 35mm, moving through the gate at 48 frames per second, twice the standard speed. Bigger is indeed better with IMAX: the image is projected onto screens over seventy feet wide and fifty feet high, and sound is pounded out via 12,000-watt six-channel sound.

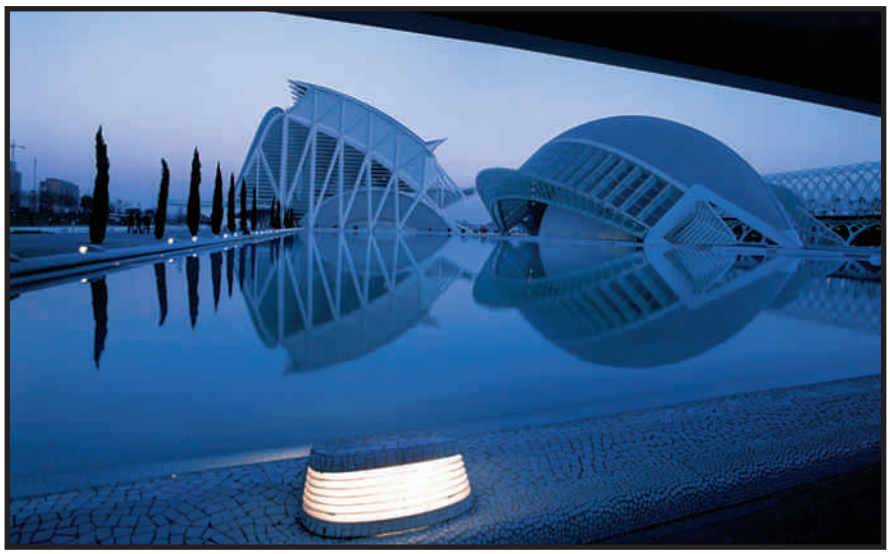
The overall effect of the IMAX show is that of a thrill ride, which perfectly suits the contemporary action features that are remastered for the format. With IMAX, every explosion, every punch, kick, and gunshot are vividly reproduced, not in lifelike image and sound but in motion captured with hyper-real visual clarity and audio that stands your hair on end and pins you to your seat.

Another alternative to conventional 35mm movie presentation is 3-D. Like IMAX, which hearkens back to immersive formats like Cinerama (which used a deeply curved screen and 70mm widescreen Ultra-Panavision technology), contemporary 3-D is a variation on an old theme, rooted in exhibition innovations that were first introduced in the 1950s to combat the introduction of free TV. Director Arch Oboler pioneered a technique called Natural Vision in the 1950s, using two simultaneously running cameras positioned to simulate the distance between an average person's two eyes to produce two negatives for every scene. Projecting Natural Vision required two synched projectors positioned to match the angle created by the two cameras during production.

Twenty-first-century digital 3-D is a revelation compared with its 1950s predecessor. The state of the art is certainly James Cameron's 2009 feature *Avatar*, for which the director put into use his proprietary 3-D fusion camera system. Like Oboler's Natural Vision, it also employs two synched cameras, but the line of sight of both cameras is infinitely adjustable and so precise it can shift focus from foreground to background (from near to far) to better match human sight (fig. **7.28**).

The future of film exhibition may not be IMAX or 3-D. But it will definitely involve an embrace of digital technologies. Indeed, that future is here.

Throughout the twentieth century, commercial exhibition involved the screening of 35mm prints of films shipped from studio to theater and then from theater to theater until the "run" was complete. The system worked, but not without the occasional headache: multireel 35mm prints are very heavy and the films themselves are susceptible to damage.



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7.27 IMAX at the museum: the Science Museum Principe Felipe (left) and L'Hemisferic, (right) the adjacent IMAX theater at the breathtaking City of Arts and Science Park in Valencia, Spain. The sci-fi design and science museum setting were meant to frame the IMAX experience as at once futuristic and the product of modern technological know-how.

An alternative to 35mm film presentation is digital exhibition. These features are stored on a computer or server that transmits the "film" (via satellite or a fiber-optic network) to a digital projector. Some smaller theaters use physical media like enhanced DVDs or Blu-Ray disks. Digital files and digital media cost little or nothing to ship, but there is one drawback. Problems at either end—the delivery end or the exhibition end—or damaged media will leave the exhibitor with a "dark" screen, nothing at all to show. Even when a 35mm print arrives damaged, a screening is almost always salvageable.

For most filmgoers, discerning whether they are watching digital

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Corbis

7.28 An audience at James Cameron's 2009 3-D feature *Avatar*.

or 35mm presentation is difficult and probably irrelevant. Cine-purists claim that they miss the texture of proper celluloid prints as well as the depths and decay of analog audio, but for the exhibitor the pristine look and sound of digital delivery makes presentation easier. As of 2010, the big theater chains had invested $1 billion in converting their theaters from 35mm to digital presentation.

7-3d Theater Sound

When sound was introduced in motion picture exhibition, the monaural, monophonic, or mono signal was the standard. For mono playback, the same sound information is delivered to every speaker in the theater. In 1940, stereophonic (two-channel) sound was introduced for the Disney animated feature *Fantasia* (James Algar et al.), notably a film with a prominent musical score and no synched dialogue. Stereophonic sound splits the mono signal into two distinct channels, each delivered to a separate speaker in the hall.

Mono sound involves a single sound strip on the film. Stereo sound employs two strips that appear as parallel squiggles on the celluloid print. Digital sound, the standard for commercial films today, looks to the naked eye like a string of dots or dashes.

Optical playback has been the industry standard for over seventy years: the film passes the audio pickup on the projector and at that moment the exciter lamp flashes a bright light focused by a lens through the transparent strip. This light shines on a photocell, a solid-state device that converts light into electrical energy. The advent of digital sound recording and playback has changed motion picture presentation as dramatically as the recording industry's shift from the phonograph record to the CD changed music playback. With digital film playback, an optical reader is mounted on (or integrated into) the projector. As in analog audio pickup, the reader uses a light-emitting diode (LED) to focus light through the film and onto a photocell. This creates pulses of current that the reader decodes. This digital information is then transferred to a computer where it is compressed onto a CD. The six tracks (right, left, center, left-surround, right-surround, and subwoofer) of the digital soundtrack are compressed onto one or two CDs, depending on the length of the movie.

The equipment necessary to present multitrack stereo was through 1970 prohibitively expensive until Dolby Laboratories introduced the Dolby Cinema Processor. Named for its inventor, Ray Dolby, Dolby Laboratories have been instrumental in the evolution of modern sound playback and amplification. Dolby SRD, introduced in the early 1990s, is one of several digital sound reduction/enhancement technologies that dramatically improve the signal-to-noise ratio for theatrical exhibition. (The other major digital sound technologies are SDDS and DTS).

If you sit through the entire closing credits of a contemporary commercial film, you will likely see the logo for THX. This logo refers not to a specific technology but to a quality-control certification system first implemented at movie theaters by George Lucas's Lucasfilm for the first run of the 1983 film *The Return of the Jedi* (Roger Marquand). The THX logo is virtually ubiquitous at first-run movie theaters today and on high-end consumer home theater equipment.

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CHAPTER SUMMARY

Film is a business as well as an art form. Film literacy involves understanding the financial and practical constraints upon filmmakers as well as the ways that marketing and exhibition strategies affect our expectations about a film.

7-1 THE BUSINESS OF FILM

Learning Outcome: ***Understand and appreciate how decisions made during development, production, postproduction, distribution, and exhibition are financial as well as aesthetic, and practical as well as imaginative.***

- Six corporations control approximately 95 percent of the film market in the United States. They optimize synergies—strategic relationships that allow them to move filmed products through a variety of markets and venues in order to maximize profits.
- So-called indie, or independent, film companies make films on tighter budgets. Their films are released to far fewer theaters than bigger, more expensive studio films.
- Capital investment often guides aesthetic decisions; for all films, casting, production design, sound design, and even camera and lighting decisions are constrained by budget.
- The challenge for those who finance and make movies is to transform the notoriously haphazard production of art into an industrial process that operates within a predictable schedule and budget.

7-2 DISTRIBUTION AND MARKETING

Learning Outcome: ***Identify and analyze various distribution strategies and the role of trailers and posters in the marketing of motion pictures.***

- Positioning a film in the marketplace involves generating and manipulating the "buzz" about a film in print, on radio, on TV, and over the Internet.
- One of the principal challenges of positioning a film in advance of its release is settling on a message that can be distilled to a tagline.
- Two types of trailers are used for commercial films: teaser trailers, meant to create awareness many months in advance of a big film's release; and story trailers that feature scenes from the actual film, meant to get audiences into theatres.
- Posters are a key aspect of the marketing campaign. A successful poster, like a successful trailer, answers two key questions: Who is in the picture? What is the picture about?
- To help executives predict a movie's success and plan a marketing campaign, test screenings are staged in a variety of geographic sites and with filmgoers codified by such demographics as gender, education, income, and religious affiliation.
- Another key factor in planning a film's release is the rating imposed by the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA) for the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA).
- Distributors opt to open big or small depending on the scale of the production and their investment, the budget secured for advertising and promotion, the targeted audience, and marketing assumptions based on test screenings.
- Distribution strategies include the saturation, showcase, limited release, and four-walling strategies.

7-3 EXHIBITION

Learning Outcome: ***Recognize and discuss the effect of exhibition on our experience of a film.***

- Exhibitors rent or license a single positive print of a film from distributors for the purposes of screening it, for an admission price, to an audience. In exchange for permission to screen the movie in their theater, exhibitors pay a licensing fee to the distributor.
- In the late nineteenth century and through the early 1900s, films were shown at a variety of public venues: at vaudeville shows and plays, in saloons, and at amusement parks. Venues then evolved from storefront theaters (nickelodeons) to movie palaces to multi- and megaplexes. The art house, or independent movie theater, offers an alternative to the multiplex.
- The overall look of a film depends on its aspect ratio, the ratio of frame width to frame height.
- Sound projection and amplification has evolved with the size of film venues, along with technologies to improve sound quality.

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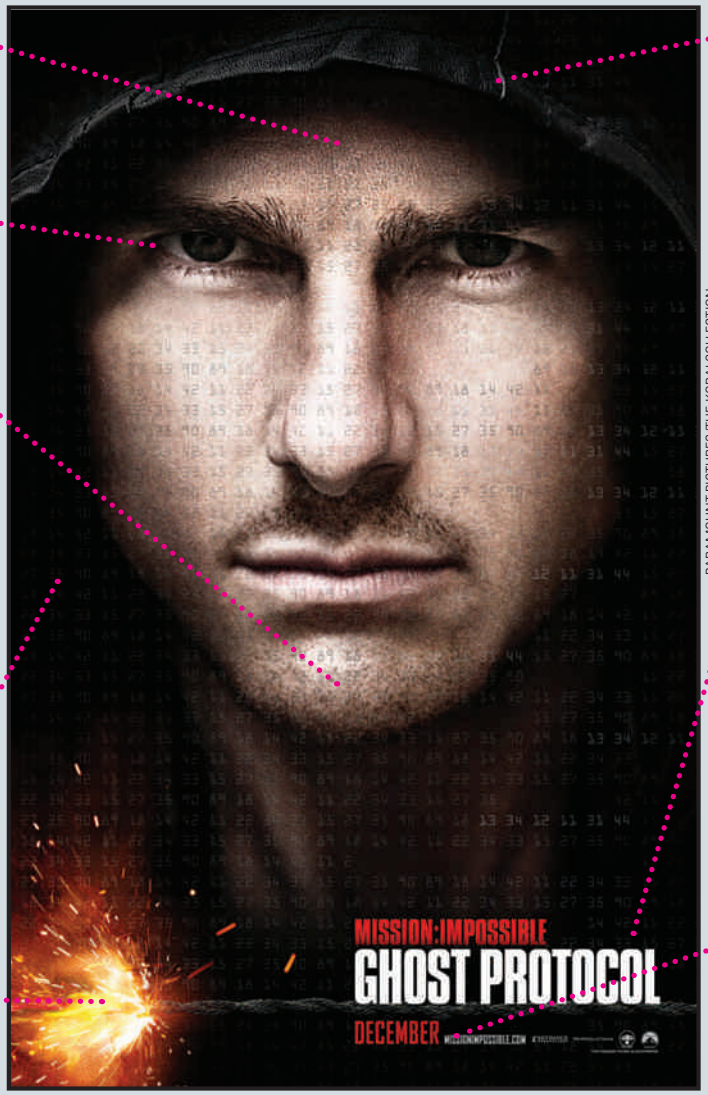
FOCUS on Film Promotion: *Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol*

Mission: Impossible—Ghost Protocol was a Christmas season release in 2011. It was a tent-pole title for its distributor Paramount Pictures and the fourth in the *Mission: Impossible* franchise, a rebooted adaptation of a popular television show than ran from 1966 to 1973. Budgeted at nearly $150 million and with an advertising budget of at least another $50 million (studios do not often publicize ad budgets), the film was in every way a big-budget studio event film. The investment paid off with over a half billion dollars in worldwide theatrical revenues in its first month in release. The poster announcing its forthcoming release rather simply embodied the studio's message, positioning the film simply and successfully in the marketplace. Because *Mission: Impossible* is a high-concept, presold property, the studio marketers believed the simpler the message, the better.



PARAMOUNT PICTURES/THE KOBALCOLLECTION

Paramount is banking on the star appeal of Tom Cruise. He is literally the face of the franchise.

His eyes set the mood—this is a serious film.

His face is stubbled to suggest toughness—a rough-and-ready attitude.

The black background highlights the images.

The lit fuse alludes to the opening of the TV show.

His head is hooded to signal his clandestine activity as a superspy.

Paramount is branding this episode as at once something familiar (another *Mission: Impossible* movie) and something totally new—a reboot with its own title. Its predecessor was advertised more simply as just another entry in the franchise: *M:i:3* (J. J. Abrams, 2006).

This is a big-budget, Christmas season, studio event film. The opening weekend date will be announced in future ad spots and trailers on TV, on the Internet, and in theaters.

What's left off the poster: (1) Tom Cruise's name; he's such a big star, it is unnecessary here; (2) the rest of the cast—Cruise is such a big star he is able to "open" the film on his own; (3) the director Brad Bird, well known for his work in animation (*The Incredibles,* 2004). Bird's name, and the story of his debut as a live-action director, distract from the message of the film.

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ANALYZE COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL CONTEXTS

Use these questions to consider how the aspects of industry and commerce (financing, distribution, and exhibition) affect the audience's perception of the film you are analyzing. For basic information on budgets and box office, go to www.imdb.com or www.the-numbers.com.

- How does the commercial and industrial context shape the meaning of the film?

7-1 THE BUSINESS OF FILM	• How do the production values of the film reflect its budget? How extensive is the list of cast and crew? How elaborate are the costumes, sets, effects, score, and so on? • If the film was a big-budget Hollywood "event" film, which of the six big conglomerate studios produced it? What kinds of synergies did they draw upon? • If the film was a low-budget independent production, what aspects of production, distribution, and exhibition distinguished it from a big studio film? • Was the film considered to be a financial success, and what factors account for its success or lack of success in the marketplace? Was the film a creative success?
7-2 DISTRIBUTION AND MARKETING	• What did you know about this film before seeing it, and how might your expectations have shaped your reaction to it? • Did you see any of the film's cast in the media, and what message did they deliver about the film? Where did they appear, and what does that tell you about the intended demographic? • Study the trailers and posters created for the film. What message did they convey? What demographic did they seem to be designed for? • What was the rating designation of the film? How did the rating affect the marketing campaign? • What sort of distribution strategy was employed? Was it appropriate? Did it work?
7-3 EXHIBITION	• Describe the theater and the audience for the screening. How did the environment in which you watched the film affect your experience of it? • What is the film's intended aspect ratio? What format did you see it in? If you are able, compare a scene from the film in the intended format and reformatted for TV and describe the differences. • In the theater, notice where the sound seems to come from (what part of the auditorium) and whether different parts of the soundtrack are coming from different locations. Also observe the volume and sound quality.

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